

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 69 (2012) 960 – 966

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2012)

EMPATHY AND TEACHERS' ROLES

Snežana Stojiljković*, Gordana Djigić, Blagica Zlatković

*Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18000 Niš, Serbia**Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18000 Niš, Serbia**Teachers' faculty in Vranje, University of Niš, Partizanska 14, 17500 Vranje, Serbia*

Abstract

Teachers' profession is related to many different roles such as: teacher's role in the narrow sense, teacher as motivator, evaluator, cognitive-diagnostic role, social relations manager and partner in the emotional interaction. The purpose of the study is to investigate whether empathy (empathy quotient and emotional empathy) is connected to the self-assessment of success in teachers' roles performing. The sample consisted of 120 teachers (37 primary school teachers and 83 subject teachers) from several schools in Serbia. The research findings show that empathy may contribute to the successful fulfilling of teachers' professional roles.

© 2012 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Dr. Zafer Bekirogullari of Cognitive – Counselling, Research & Conference Services C-crcs.

Keywords: teachers' roles; empathy; Teachers' Roles Inventory; Empathy Quotient Questionnaire

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades educational psychologists were concerned with factors of effective teaching and learning. Many researchers were focused to the teacher as a factor of effective learning. The main research problem in this field was the investigation into personal characteristics of successful teachers, such as personality traits or some dynamic dispositions (Handley, 1973; Ryans, 1970; Petrović-Bjekić, 1997). Recently teachers' roles have become the main field of interest of researchers, and this trend is recognizable also in Serbia (Bjekić, 1999; UNICEF, 2001). Many studies show that successful teachers' roles performing is connected with some personality features, so it is important to study what personality dimensions are connected to specific teachers' role playing. The teacher is much more than a lecturer, and therefore should have a number of competencies to carry out its professional roles. The structure of competencies consists of abilities, knowledge, skills and personality traits. Emotional characteristics of teachers are often cited as very important in creating the overall atmosphere in the classroom, and among these the most important are the emotional stability and empathic sensitivity (Bjekić, 2000; Morgan, 1977; Stojiljković, Stojanović & Dosković, 2011). The most current research topic is a classroom

Corresponding author: Associate professor, University of Nis, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology, tel.: +381 18 514 311, fax: +381 18 514 310, E-mail address: snezana.stojiljkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

management because the way of pedagogical leadership determines what will be the effects of schooling. This concept combines teacher's personality, his roles and professional behavior, and the results of his actions in the classroom (Watkins & Wagner, 2000; Bru et al., 2002). It is important to emphasize that classroom management refers to creating safe and stimulating learning environment. Good teacher should create an appropriate climate in the classroom and thus to encourage the development of students' capacity for learning. Such teacher's behavior directs the students' capacities to the required educational standards and enable high academic achievement (Djigić & Stojiljković, 2011).

1.1. Teachers' roles

Teaching profession is very complex, so teacher's roles are numerous. Traditionally, it is possible to differ two main groups of teacher's roles: the first one is related to general personal growth of students and the second one is connected with the acquisition of knowledge. There are some other classifications of teachers' roles. They reflect the fact that contemporary school is treated as the institution that should support the overall cognitive and personal development of each student and so to contribute to social development of the society in whole. Beltran (2011) distinguishes the social side of teaching (creating learning conditions) and the task-oriented side of teaching (imparting knowledge to the learners). Harden and Crosby (2000) point out twelve teachers' roles grouped in six areas: 1) the information provider, 2) the model, 3) the facilitator, 4) the assessor, 5) the planner, and 6) the resource material creator. Ivić and his associates (Ivić et al., 2001) start from somewhat different classifications of teachers' roles. They emphasized that teacher nowadays should cooperate with parents and other partners in local community and wider social environment, although his main field of activity remains through teaching and education. Accordingly, they differ six categories of teacher's roles:

- Teaching role in the narrowest sense (teacher as a lecturer, teacher as an organizer, a partner in pedagogic communication, an expert in the subject field);
- Motivational role (motivating students to work, stimulating and maintaining their interests, teacher as a model for career guidance);
- The role of evaluator (performance assessment and evaluation of students' behavior and personality);
- Cognitive-diagnostic role;
- Regulator of social relations in the classroom as a group;
- Partner in the emotional interaction.

In order to fulfill all these complex roles, teacher should have appropriate competences that represent combination of traits, abilities, knowledge and skills. Having in mind the nature of the roles listed above, it is clear that empathy is important integral part of teachers' competences, together with overall pedagogical competences, competences related to the course content, and communication competences. There is a need for studying teachers' roles because their successful performing can improve the quality of educational process and thus contribute to the quality of human resources of society (Zlatković & Petrović, 2011).

1.2. Empathy

Empathy is often cited as a very important characteristic of teachers, which enable adequate communication between the participants of the educational process. Emotional competencies are essential for successful carrying out the various professional roles of teachers. Recent research findings in Serbia also suggest that the empathy is one of key teacher's capacities that enable building of such atmosphere in the classroom which makes each student to feel pleasure, free, adopted and involved, respected and understood (Bjekić, 2000; Radovanović, 1993; Stojiljković et al., 2011). This is the reason why we have decided to investigate the relations between teachers' empathy and their professional roles performing.

There is, as yet, no universally agreed-upon definition on the term 'empathy'. Definitions differ depending on aspect that is emphasized by the authors. Definitions cover a broad spectrum, ranging from caring for other people and having a desire to help them (Hoffman, 1978), to experiencing emotions that match another person's emotions, to knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling (Davis, 1980). Empathy also means to be preoccupied by the thoughts and feelings of other people, putting yourself in their place, trying to think like them. According to Baron-

Cohen and Wheelwright (2004), 'empathy is about spontaneously and naturally tuning into the other person's thoughts and feelings, whatever these might be'. There are two major elements of empathy. The first is its cognitive component (understanding the others feelings and the ability to take their perspective), the second one is the affective component (an observer's appropriate emotional response to another person's emotional state).

Based on the above definitions of empathy becomes clear why this is an important personality dispositions of teachers. It can be assumed that empathy is certainly a considerable factor in the performance of a large number of teachers' professional roles.

2. Method

2.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relations between empathy and teachers' assessments of the importance and their own success in the performance of different teachers' roles. Also the research was directed toward determining the level of teachers' empathy on the basis of two measures (empathy quotient and emotional empathy). The main research goal was to find out whether empathy contributes to the successful fulfilling of teachers' professional roles.

2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 120 teachers (37 primary school teachers and 83 subject teachers) from several schools in Serbia, they were participants of training program on inclusive education. The sample contained more females (83 - 69%) than males (37 - 31%), which reflects the situation in the teaching profession in Serbia. The participants' average age was 43, and ranged from 24 to 63 (most of them are 30 to 47 years old). Working experience of our examinees is ranged from zero to 40 years ($M=14.41$, $SD=11.13$), mostly from 4 to 12 years working in education. Most of teachers (76) completed four years studies, 28 of them completed two or three-years studies and 15 teachers have some post-graduate level (specialist, master or magisterium).

2.3. Instruments and reliability of measures

Two measures of empathy were used: empathy quotient and emotional empathy. Empathy Quotient questionnaire (EQ-short, Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) consists of 22 items that are related to two aspects of empathy: cognitive and affective. Each item describes one situation from everyday life in which the subject recognizes and understands others' thinking, mental or affective states, attitudes, wishes. Subject expresses his agreement with each statement on the four-level scale. So, total scores on the scale ranged from 22 to 88. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of internal consistency shows that the instrument has good enough reliability in our sample: $\text{Alpha}=0.754$.

The second measure of empathy is obtained from teachers' self-assessment of their own empathic ability on the scale from 1 to 10. Teachers were asked to estimate how much they are able to enjoy the feelings, thoughts, emotional state of another person.

Inventory of teachers' roles were designed (by the authors of this article) for the research purposes. Our starting point is the classification of teachers' role that was made by Ivić et al. (2001). The instrument consists of 13 items for self-assessment on a five-level scale. Each item describes behaviour that present one element of six teachers' roles. It is intended to measure self-assessed effectiveness in performing the following roles: teaching role in the narrowest sense, motivating role, role of the evaluator, cognitive-diagnostic role, role of the regulator of social relations in the classroom, role of the partner in emotional interaction. Internal consistency of this instrument was quite good (Cronbach's $\text{Alpha}=0.891$).

Also, teachers were asked to make a rank list according to the importance of each role aspect.

The short questionnaire is used to obtain data concerning some control variables (gender, age, education and working experience).

2.4. Procedure

The application of the instruments was conducted in groups of teachers involved to training in the field of inclusive education (18 to 25 subjects per group) by competent researchers. Participants were told that data will be

used only for research purposes and that the anonymity is guaranteed. Data are analyzed through descriptive statistics, analysis of variance and correlation measures.

3. Results

Generally, the assumption about connection between empathy and self-assessment of success in the performance of teachers' role is confirmed. There is no significant correlation between empathy and teachers' assessment of the importance of their professional roles.

The obtained results will be presented in the next few parts of this paper.

3.1. Empathy of teachers

One of the research tasks was to determine the level of empathy of teachers in our sample. Average empathy quotient is 68.84 (SD=6.84) and it means that the empathy of our teachers is high having in mind that scores on Empathy quotient questionnaire are ranged from 22 to 88. The average measure of emotional empathy, obtained through teachers' self-assessment on the scale from 1 to 10, is also high ($M=7.85$, $SD=1.428$). High measures of empathy are usual in teachers' samples. Also our sample consists of teachers involved into training in the field of inclusive education. It means that they have already shown the sensibility and openness for others.

Correlation between two measures of empathy is $r=0.411$ ($p>.000$). The reason for this low correlation is in different meaning of two measures. Empathy quotient is related mostly to cognitive aspect of empathy and emotional empathy refers to the other aspect.

3.2. Teachers' self-assessment of effectiveness in teachers' roles performing

Teachers assessed very high their own effectiveness in performing all teachers' roles. Average grades are consistent and ranged from 4.23 to 4.46 on the five-level scale (Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' self-assessment of effectiveness in teachers' roles performing

Teachers' roles	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Teachers' role in the narrowest sense	3.00	5.00	4.32	0.51
Motivational role	2.50	5.00	4.46	0.54
The role of evaluator	3.00	5.00	4.34	0.55
Cognitive-diagnostic role	3.00	5.00	4.37	0.70
Regulator of social relations in the classroom	2.00	5.00	4.42	0.72
The role of the partner in emotional interaction	2.33	5.00	4.23	0.62

These high grades could be explained by teachers' non-critical self-assessment and giving socially desirable answers. This is the risk whenever research data are collected through self-assessment questionnaires or inventories.

There are some significant differences in self-assessment of the effectiveness in some of teachers' roles regarding to age, gender and education. Namely, women assess themselves as more successful than men do in performing cognitive-diagnostic role ($F=6.313$, $p>.013$); older teachers are self-estimated as more successful in the role of regulator of social relations than younger teachers ($r=0.188$, $p>.040$). Teachers with specialist degree are self-estimated as more successful in teaching role in the narrowest sense than teachers who completed two or four-years studies ($F=2.438$, $p>.039$). Primary school teachers assess themselves as the most successful in comparison with all other categories of teachers ($F=3.061$, $p>.008$).

3.3. Assessment of importance of teachers' roles

Teachers were asked to rank all offered elements of different teachers' roles according to their importance. In total, there were 13 elements to rank (each of six roles has a few elements). Rank 1 means the most important

element according to teachers' opinion, and rank 13 means the least important element. Bringing together all the elements of each role, we get the information what teachers mean about the importance of different teachers' roles (Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' assessment of the importance of professional roles performing (average rank of each role)

Teachers' roles	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Teachers' role in the narrowest sense	2.50	11.50	5.50	2.14
Motivational role	1.50	11.00	4.98	2.50
The role of evaluator	3.50	12.50	9.46	2.33
Cognitive-diagnostic role	1.00	13.00	7.89	3.23
Regulator of social relations in the classroom	1.00	13.00	8.21	3.36
The role of the partner in emotional interaction	2.00	12.00	7.95	3.04

Teachers evaluate themselves as equally successful in all roles, but as the most important they assess the motivational role and role of teaching in the narrow sense, as less important they assess cognitive-diagnostic, then the role of partner in affective communication, the role of the regulator of social relations in the class, and finally, as the least important they assess the role of evaluator.

The situation is similar when the importance that teachers attach to roles is perceived through the elements that are usually ranked at the top three or the last three places of the rank list. At the top of ranking list the most often are teaching role in the narrowest sense (50% of teachers put at the first place its elements related to teaching subject content, but not its elements related to pedagogical communication with students and with innovating teaching process) and motivational role (18% of teachers put its elements at the first place and 32% of teachers ranked them as the second important aspects of teachers' roles). At the end of the ranking list the most often are the role of the partner in affective interaction and the role of evaluator.

Teachers differently assessed the importance of some roles regarding to the age, working experience and education. Older teachers estimated the role of the partner in affective interaction as more important than younger do ($r = 0.256$, $p > .011$). The same is difference between teachers with longer working experiences when compared with less experienced teachers ($r = 0.211$, $p > .038$) – more experienced teachers see this role as more important. The role of regulator of social relations in the class is seen as more important by teachers of socio-humanistic subjects, and as less important by teachers of mathematics and technical sciences and teachers of natural sciences ($F = 3.042$, $p > .009$). The role of evaluator is seen as important by math and technical sciences' teachers and as not so important by teachers of physical education, arts and by primary school teachers ($F = 3.854$, $p > .002$).

It could be expected that there is correlation between teachers' self-assessment of the effectiveness in determined role and their assessment of the importance of the same role. The results do not confirm this expectation. The only significant correlation is related to the role of evaluator: teachers who assess themselves as more successful in this role performing think that this role is more important ($r = -.214$, $p > .038$).

3.4. Correlation between empathy and self-assessed effectiveness in teachers' roles performing and assessment of importance of teacher' roles

The main research task of the study was to investigate the relationships between empathy and teachers' roles. The results concerning the relationship between both measures of empathy and self-assessment of teachers' effectiveness in their professional roles performing are presented in Table 3.

These results confirm the previous results that stress the empathy as an important personal capacity for success in teaching profession. To perform all of mentioned roles successfully, teachers have to be able to perceive and understand students' thoughts, thinking way, learning strategies and styles, mental, motivational and emotional states, their interests, social relations. Our results show that for successful teaching it is not enough to have emotional empathy, it is important to have developed both aspects of empathy – cognitive and emotional.

In contrast to these results, it appeared that there is no significant correlation between empathy measures and the estimated importance of teachers' roles. This finding is understandable having in mind that the estimation of the

importance of teachers' roles is made mostly on the basis of teachers' knowledge about their own profession, not in regard to their filling about easiness and success in performing their professional roles.

Table 3. Pearson' correlation coefficients between empathy measures and self-assessed effectiveness in teachers' roles performing (p< 0.01; * p< 0.05)**

Teachers' role	Correlation with	
	empathy quotient	emotional empathy
Teachers' role in the narrowest sense	0.464**	0.234*
Motivational role	0.400**	0.143
The role of evaluator	0.362**	0.216*
Cognitive-diagnostic role	0.419**	0.163
Regulator of social relations in the classroom	0.344**	0.165
The role of the partner in emotional interaction	0.491**	0.195*

3.5. Empathy, teachers' roles and control variables

The results show that there is no difference in empathy in regard to any control variable. This finding could be explained by high level of empathy in the whole sample, so it was not possible to register differences within the sample. Earlier researches show that women have higher empathy than men. So, unexpected result is that there is no difference in empathy regarding to the gender. This finding is due to unbalanced gender structure of the sample - women constitute the majority in the sample.

Some differences appeared in the self-estimation of the effectiveness and in the estimation of the importance of some teachers' roles in regard to some control variables.

Analysis of variance showed that there is significant difference in the self-assessment of effectiveness in the performance of cognitive-diagnostic role regarding to gender. Women estimated higher their effectiveness in the cognitive-diagnostic role ($F = 6.313$, $p < .013$).

Older teachers (compared with younger) evaluated higher their success in the role of regulator of social relations in the classroom ($r = 0.188$, $p < .040$), as well as in the role of partner in the affective communication ($r = 0.224$, $p < .015$). Regarding to the role of a partner in affective interaction, elementary school teachers are self-evaluated as the most successful, when compared with all other groups of subject teachers ($F = 3.061$, $p < .008$).

Also, it is registered significant difference in self-assessment of performing the teaching role in the narrowest sense: teachers with specialization degree have better self-evaluation when compared with teachers who completed three or four-years studies ($F = 2.438$; $p < .039$).

The importance of some teachers' roles is estimated differently by some groups of teachers. Older teachers see the role of a partner in affective communication as more important than younger teachers do ($r = 0.256$, $p < .011$). Similarly, teachers with longer experience in education give more importance to this role in comparison with less experienced teachers ($r = 0.211$, $p < .038$).

The role of a regulator of social relations in the classroom is estimated as more important by teachers of socio-humanistic sciences and as less important by teachers of mathematics and technical sciences ($F = 3.042$, $p < .009$). Simultaneously, among all groups of teachers, teachers of mathematics and technical sciences see the role of evaluator as more important than others and the least importance to this role is given by teachers of physical education, arts and primary school teachers ($F = 3.854$, $p < .002$).

These results suggest that teacher's life and professional experience, as well as the appropriate professional education, contribute to the intention and competences for performing different professional roles, primarily those related to social relationships and affective communication in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

In general, the research findings show that empathy may contribute to the successful fulfilling of teachers' professional roles. The study was based on data given by the teachers themselves and their assessments with regard

to success in carrying out their own professional roles and in relation to the degree of empathy. It is therefore possible that they were not objective enough in their self-assessment and to some extent gave socially desirable answers. It could be suggested for further research of this issue to combine measures of self-assessment and objective measures of classroom behavior.

Acknowledgements

This work was partially supported by Ministry of Education and Science, Serbia, within the research project No. 179002, and within the research project No. 179018.

References

- Baron-Cohen, S. & Wheelwright, S. (2004). The empathy quotient: an investigation of adults with Asperger Syndrome or high functioning autism, and normal sex differences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 34, 163-175.
- Beltrán, E.V.: *Roles of teachers - a case study based on: Diary of a language teacher (Joachim Appel, 1995)*, Universitat Jaume, retrieved in 2011 from: <http://www.uji.es/bin/publ/edicions/jfi6/teachers.pdf>
- Bjekić, D. (1999). *Profesionalni razvoj nastavnika (Teachers' professional development)*, Užice: Učiteljski fakultet.
- Bjekić, D. (2000). Uspješnost u nastavi i empatija nastavnika (Success in teaching and teacher empathy). *Psihologija*, 3-4, 499-520.
- Bru, E., Stephens, P. & Torsheim, T. (2002). Students' perception of class management and reports of their own misbehavior, *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol.40, No4, 287-307.
- Davis, M. (1980). A multidimensional approach to individual differences in empathy. Retrieved Jun 22, 2011, http://www.uv.es/~friasnav/Davis_1980.pdf
- Djigić, G., Stojiljković, S. (2011). Classroom management styles, classroom climate and school achievement, *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences Journal*, 29, 819-828.
- Handly G.D. (1973). *Personality, learning and teaching*, London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Harden, R.M. & Crosby, J.R. (2000). The good teacher is more than a lecturer – the twelve roles of the teacher, *Medical Teacher*, 22(4): 334-347.
- Hoffman, M. (1978). Developmental synthesis of affect and cognition and its implications for altruistic motivation. *Developmental Psychology*, 11, 607-622.
- Ivić, I., Pešikan, A., Antić, S. (2001). *Aktivno učenje (Active learning)*, Beograd: Institut za psihologiju.
- Morgan, S. R. (1977). Personality variables as predictors of empathy, *Behavioral Disorders*, Vol. 2, No.2, 89-94.
- Petrović-Bjekić D. (1997). Dinamičke osobine ličnosti nastavnika i uspješnost u nastavi (Teachers' dynamic personality characteristics and teaching effectiveness). *Psihologija*, 1-2, 93-110.
- Radovanović, V. (1993). Empatičnost srednjoškolskih nastavnika (Empathy of secondary school teachers). *Psihologija*, Vol. 26, 1-2, 11-50.
- Ryans, D.G. (1970). *Characteristics of teachers*, Washington D.C.: American Council on Education.
- Stojiljković, S., Stojanović, A. & Dosković, Z. (2011). Moral reasoning and empathy in Serbian teachers. Oral presentation submitted on International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology ICEEPSY 2011, Istanbul, Turkey, *Abstracts*, p. 133-134.
- UNICEF (2001). *Primary education in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, Belgrade: UNICEF Belgrade Office.
- Watkins, C. & Wagner, P. (2000). *Improving school behaviour*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Zlatković, B., Petrović, D. (2011). Inicijalno obrazovanju učitelja u Srbiji: analiza kompatibilnosti planova i programa učiteljskih fakulteta (Pre-service teacher training in Serbia: Analysis of the compatibility of teachers faculties curricula), *Nastava i vaspitanje (Journal of Education)*, (60) 4, 651-663.